

The Art of the Lecture

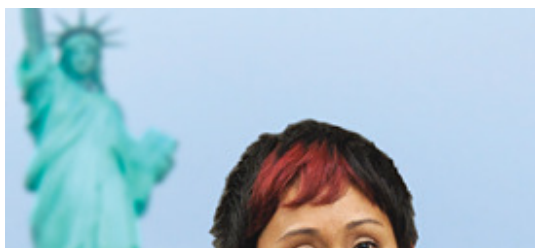
Giving a compelling presentation before a lecture hall of students can be one of the most intimidating prospects for a professor—and also the most rewarding. At its best, the lecture can have the power of a theatrical performance and can transform the intellectual curiosity of students. Professors at the School of Arts and Sciences in New Brunswick teaching an intrepid series of lectures called Signature Courses explain what it takes.

By David W. Major • Illustration by James Bennett • Photography by Nick Romanenko

Last fall, on the morning that he was making final preparations to give his maiden lecture for a new course called “Soul Beliefs: Causes and Consequences,” professor [Daniel Ogilvie](#) awoke scared to death. He had once again come down with a paralyzing case of stage fright. With only hours to go before he would stand before more than 250 students in room 101 in Hickman Hall on the Douglass Campus at [Rutgers–New Brunswick](#), Ogilvie entertained one foreboding thought after another. He was convinced he wasn’t prepared. He wondered whether he would have anything to say. If he did, it would only take him five minutes to get through the material. Then what? There he would be, gripping the lectern for dear life, hundreds of eyes on him, alone.



“The lead-up is so painful; it’s a nightmare,” says Ogilvie, a professor in the [Department of Psychology](#) in the [School of Arts and Sciences \(SAS\)](#) who has been teaching at Rutgers for 41 years. “But then it’s time to start, and I start. I can’t be self-conscious at all, wondering if my fly is down or something. In my mind, I am just staying a point ahead of what I am saying to the students. I am thinking only about the students in front of me, because my job is to communicate with them. And it is a performance. It is showtime.”



The art of presenting a compelling lecture is perhaps the biggest challenge facing a professor. At research universities, where teachers are most valued for their research contributions and published work, certainly as they strive for tenure, the majority of professors learn the lecturing craft on the fly, without the benefit of formal instruction. Their first introduction came as undergraduates



Robyn Rodriguez, an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology, cotaught “Immigrant States: Jersey’s Global Routes” in the fall of 2010. “There are a lot of things I have done, even stylistically: I have a streak of red in my hair. I try to embody a particular persona to break down boundaries to new opportunities of connecting with students.”

and an uncompromising enthusiasm for sharing it. At its best, lecturing has the magical power of enthraling a student to the wonders of learning and intellectual rigor that will last his or her lifetime.

There have been many such moments lately within SAS, which, two years ago, introduced a series of ambitious lectures called [Signature Courses](#). Broaching complex, topical issues—extinction, energy and climate change, New Jersey immigration, the ethics of food choice and policy, beliefs about one’s soul and the afterlife, and the collateral effects of war—Signature Courses are taught by some of the top lecturers at SAS, who have had the added pressure, much of it self-imposed, to outdo themselves onstage. The courses cut a broad intellectual swath, stretching across many fields of traditional disciplines—from, say, sociology to biochemistry to the humanities—in their scope of inquiry. To expose as many students as possible to the classes (and to keep up with growing demand), each course is typically open to 150 to 200 students and held in a large lecture hall.

Signature Courses are the touchstone to the new [Core Curriculum](#) that has been unveiled this fall at SAS, the largest school at Rutgers, with more than 800 faculty members, 70 majors and minors, and 21,000 students. The curriculum addresses the need to prepare students for an increasingly interdependent world and for the complexities of the fast-paced 21st century that technology and science have wrought. As [Douglas Greenberg RC’69](#), the executive dean of SAS, puts it: “We want our students to be citizens of their communities and of their world, capable of moving knowledgeably across cultural and geographic boundaries. And we want them to be technologically and scientifically literate because every public policy issue they will face as citizens will require such literacy.”

To achieve that end, the new curriculum has

when, like thousands of other students, they had their intellectual barn doors blown open by a riveting lecture delivered by an impassioned professor. As graduate students, during which time they serve as teaching assistants, they filled in as lecturers for their faculty mentors, whom they tried to emulate, to varying degrees, as paragons of effective public speaking.

Lecturing can be the most effective way that a teacher can impart information to a class. As with any course, students learn through assigned reading, complementary research, and writing papers. But, it is through the lecture that a professor can synthesize all the disparate ideas and knowledge. Through their delivery, they animate the material, adding context to information that may have been tenuous in the minds of students. Good lecturing calls on many attributes: a compelling persona that is equal parts authority figure and approachable mentor; a well-modulated voice and knack for oratorical flourish; an ability to summon anecdotes and examples for explanation; an awareness of how they are coming across to students; and, above all else, an exhaustive command of the material



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three learning goals, which are the basis for a contemporary liberal arts and sciences education at a leading public research university. "21st Century Challenges" offers a host of courses that take a multidisciplinary approach to explore what graduates will confront as global citizens and leaders. "Areas of Inquiry" grooms students for learning how to critically examine the natural environment, human behavior, and the individual's role in society. And "Cognitive Skills and Processes" hones students' writing and communication skills while developing their quantitative and reasoning skills. A big reason for the success of the curriculum will be because of the commitment and skill of lecturers.

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Daniel Kelemen, an associate professor in the Department of Political Science and director of the Center for European Studies, taught "Politics and Social Policy: Lessons From Europe" in the spring. "My lecture is not just a monologue. If that were the case, we shouldn't do the lectures live, and we don't need universities."

"Maybe I am old-fashioned, but I really believe in the live, in-person lecture format," says Daniel Kelemen, an associate professor in the Department of Political Science and director of the Center for European Studies who taught "Politics and Social Policy: Lessons From Europe" in the spring. "My lecture is not just a monologue. If that were the case, we shouldn't do the lectures live, and we don't need universities. But, no, it's about engagement and interaction. Lecturing is one of the few live performance acts there are."

As an undergraduate pursuing a degree in sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, Kelemen remembers enrolling in a handful of legendary classes that students clamored to get into for the chance to witness colorful instructors, such as Martin Jay, who was teaching the intellectual history of Europe. Presented in a cavernous lecture

hall with more than 500 students occupying every conceivable square foot, the lecture had an enormous impact on Kelemen, who went on to receive his graduate degrees in political science from Stanford University. "His style was just—go. He was passionate, animated. And his knowledge was encyclopedic."

Indeed, the cornerstone of a compelling lecture is command. When lecturers know their stuff, everything else seems to fall into place. The mastery of the material brings self-confidence, fostering a fluency in conveying the information. But that skill can take time to develop. Kelemen, for instance, says that when he was a young lecturer, his presentations were a little on the dry side, bogged down with all the theory he had mastered as a graduate student. With the subsequent years of research, he knows more and now has firsthand knowledge of most of the European nations he lectures about because he has visited them, allowing him to shade his lectures with his personal experiences.

Signature Courses incorporate such a broad sweep of information in their integration of many disciplines that they invite professors to revisit the material, often digging deeper into their research, in order to present a more engaging lecture. Ogilvie believes "Soul Beliefs"—his course about student opinions regarding the idea of a soul and the afterlife, and where these opinions were formed—is the only one of its kind in the nation, and he and his teaching partner have been conducting novel research while publishing papers on the subject. "What I enjoy about this



course," says Ogilvie, "is that, at my old age, I am learning a lot of things that I had never thought of."

Likewise, [Andy Egan](#), an associate professor in the [Department of Philosophy](#), is presenting the topic of food production and distribution in his Signature Course "Eating Right: The Ethics of Food Choices and Food Policy," which he is again teaching this fall. "The content is much more interdisciplinary and closer to the ground than most of the stuff I teach, which is usually super abstract," says Egan, who began teaching a course similar to "Eating Right" as a graduate student and has been researching the subject ever since. "I have a folder in my email to which I send suggestions to myself as ideas come to me. My course is far from a finished product."

The element of the unscripted keeps the material alive for lecturers. After all, they say, it has to continue to be exciting for them if they want to make it exciting for students. It allows them to be spontaneous, to take a detour from their own narrative to illuminate a point, citing examples and anecdotes. "Students love anecdotes," says [Deborah Gray White](#), a Board of Governors Professor of History in the [Department of History](#) who taught "From Plantation to White House" last spring. "I use them all the time to explain things or support a point before resuming the lecture." In control of the material, professors no longer feel tethered to a prepared monologue, the prop of inexperienced or tentative lecturers.



Ethel Brooks, an associate professor in the departments of Women's and Gender Studies and Sociology, taught "War: Critical Perspectives" in the spring. "There are effective lecturers who give official, formal lectures and maintain a distance from their students. I have always been uncomfortable with claiming that authority, and I can't inhabit it and I don't want to try."



Alan Goldman, a professor in the Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology, is teaching "Energy and Climate Change" this semester. "One has to find one's own style when it comes to lecturing; trying to adopt someone else's style doesn't work."

"When I was in graduate school at New York University, I learned the most from professors who tended to speak off the cuff," says [Ethel Brooks](#), an associate professor in the departments of [Women's and Gender Studies](#) and [Sociology](#) who taught "War: Critical Perspectives" in the spring. "It was never 'Here is your lecture; here is the information.' One of them would tell stories that were amazing, real theater. He once saw me sticking to a script when I was teaching a class in grad school and said: 'Why did you do that? You know the material. Look at the students and see how they are reacting and do it that way. You will get all the information in if you do it looser.'"

But acting on the advice or example of mentors is a lot easier said than done. Many professors starting out have had to overcome one of the most dreaded of life's fears: public speaking. "Overcoming my self-consciousness was a very difficult thing," says [Alan Goldman](#), a professor in the [Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology](#) who is teaching "Energy and Climate Change" this fall. Through fits and starts, by teaching small classes of students and leading up to addressing bigger audiences, professors acclimate themselves to the classroom spotlight, even if it means simply managing their discomfort. Most lecturers begin to develop an ease with being in front of the classroom or lecture hall upon the realization that they have to let their own style emerge, as unique as one's personality. "I had many excellent lecturers in school, but

watching them was not as valuable as one might think," says Goldman. "One has to find one's own

watching them was not as valuable as one might think," says Coleman. "One has to find one's own style; trying to adopt someone else's style doesn't work."

Whatever style does emerge, however, must convey passion and conviction. "It is important for the instructor to be the most energetic person in the classroom," says Ogilvie, who is teaching "Soul Beliefs" again this fall with [Leonard Hamilton](#), also a professor in the psychology department. "It can be contagious to be around somebody like that." Physical movement and a commanding voice are the most obvious ways to convey enthusiasm. For big lecture halls, professors work the room by roaming the stage and making forays up the aisles to establish a closer connection with students. To complement her lectures, Brooks may dance (salsa), she may sing (hip-hop), she may read poetry, or she may screen films. "I approached the material in unconventional ways," she says. "I wanted to address all the ways we could think about war."

For some, becoming a confident lecturer was the most natural of things. Kelemen was in theater productions throughout his youth, had a role on the debating team, and was chosen to read the announcements over the loudspeaker in middle school. [Robyn Rodriguez](#), an assistant professor in the [Department of Sociology](#) who taught "Immigrant States: Jersey's Global Routes" with assistant professor [Carlos Decena](#), was politically active growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area and accustomed to addressing animated crowds. White had been a fifth-grade elementary school teacher. Ogilvie was an aspiring actor, though his inability to remember others' lines, he says, doomed him. Comfortable speaking before large groups of people, professors found that it was only a matter of time before they mastered their oratorical skills as lecturers.

Even with their newfound sea legs, young professors often feel pangs of inadequacy. Close in age to those whom they are teaching, they grapple with whether they are worthy of the authority bestowed upon them. After all, in the case of teaching assistants, it was just a matter of a few years ago that they themselves bobbed in the sea of students they now address. "At first, I was nervous," says Andy Egan, who teaches "Food Choices." "There is sort of this Imposter Syndrome that never really goes away. It's much less than it used to be. It's a feeling of what am I doing in this position, purporting to know this stuff?"

Lecturers get the chance to see how they stack up by observing the technique of other lecturers. Some of the Signature Courses feature two lecturers, and all of them frequently have guest lecturers from other departments who add their unique point of view to the discussion, underscoring the multidisciplinary nature of the classes. For the course "From Plantation to White House," White shared the lecturing duties with [Donna Murch](#), an associate professor in the [history department](#) with whom she codirects the [Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis](#), with each complementing the strengths of the other. In a discussion of the history of World War II, for example, Murch could talk with authority about urban life in America whereas White knew more about the broader African-American experience during this time. The two-pronged address requires considerable choreography. "We knew exactly what the other person was going to cover," says White. "You really have to be aware of the other." In coteaching "Soul Beliefs," Ogilvie benefited from Hamilton's presence because of his knowledge of the evolution of the human brain, a subject unfamiliar to Ogilvie. Robyn Rodriguez would wake at 4 a.m. on the day that she and Decena, an assistant professor in the departments of [Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies](#) as well



Deborah Gray White, a Board of Governors Professor of History in the Department of History, taught "From Plantation to White House" along with Donna Murch, an associate professor in the department, in the spring. "We knew exactly what the other person was going to cover. You really have to be aware of the other."

as [Women's and Gender Studies](#), were going to give a lecture for their immigration course, going over the scope of the delivery carefully to ensure that their distinct areas of research and scholarship were reflected in the presentation.



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Instructors, whether teaching a course in tandem or on their own, are never alone. Each professor has anywhere from three to five teaching assistants sitting in the back of the lecture hall, observing the proceedings and, depending on the preference of the lecturer, occasionally participating in the discussion. Teaching assistants also lead a recitation class, taking place between the two weekly lectures, which allows them to address small groups of students to oversee complementary coursework and discussions.

Having met with students to review lectures, teaching assistants are also a critical sounding board for the professors during analysis of how the presentation, and their performance, went—a constant obsession. Professors may wonder whether they were talking too fast or presenting the information too quickly. Were they talking down to the

students or sending the information clear over their heads? Perhaps making sure that three points were understood would have been more effective than plowing through all of the information scheduled for the day's lecture. Did they have any jokes in there to break things up, because good ones always get student attention? What did they take for granted that the students would understand? Professors teaching subjects that involve history or the social sciences may mistakenly assume that students will recognize references to contemporary historical events and figures or cultural landmarks. When Deborah Gray White was coteaching "From Plantation to White House," she was leading a discussion about Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement, events that she lived through as a young woman. Many students hadn't known the reason behind Martin Luther King Day. "So," White says, "I am always asking the question: 'Why does this matter?' I tell them my experiences, and it brings them right in."

One tricky aspect to effective lecturing, professors say, is finding a balance between being the authority in the room and being accessible to the students. The majority of lecturers want to be liked for the simple reason that it facilitates learning. Yes, there is a case for the Charles W. Kingsfields of academia, the imperious law professor who intimidated law students into achievement, the character memorably played by actor John Houseman in the movie *The Paper Chase*. But getting bees—that is, student engagement—with honey is preferable.

"There are effective lecturers who give official, formal lectures and maintain a distance from their students," says Ethel Brooks, the women's and gender studies and sociology professor. "I have always been uncomfortable with claiming that authority, and I can't inhabit it and I don't want to try. But, students still have to understand that I am imparting something important to them." Robyn Rodriguez, who teaches the New Jersey immigration course, added a streak of red to her dark hair. "There are a lot of things I have done, even stylistically," she says. "I try to embody a particular persona to break down boundaries to new opportunities of connecting with students."

And that is always the \$64,000 question forever on any lecturer's mind: "Am I reaching them?" Raised on a rich diet of electronic media, students can find sitting through an 80-minute lecture a challenge. Many professors discourage, or ban, the use of laptop computers and smart phones during class—tempting distractions with which they don't care to compete. Alan Goldman, who teaches the class on

tempting distractions with which they don't care to compete. Alan Goldman, who teaches the class on climate change, says that the biggest challenge is to not allow students to fall into passivity. There must be a dialogue, he believes, even if it is unspoken.

"I try to read the audience," says Daniel Kelemen, the instructor for the course on European public policy. "But most students are staring at you blankly even if they may be totally fascinated by what you are saying. Lecturing is not like stand-up comedy, where you know it's going well only if people are laughing."

To facilitate conversation, or if attention occasionally wanes, many lecturers rely on PowerPoint presentations, today's chalkboard, which helps complement what they are saying, especially in large lecture halls in which hearing and seeing the lecturer can be a challenge. Some lecturers rely on clickers, electronic devices that allow students to participate in pop quizzes or respond to polls or questions posed as part of the presentation. The results are immediately posted, and the anonymity of their replies can be less daunting than the specter of raising their hand and being called on. To limit self-consciousness or intimidation, Rodriguez likes to break students into small groups in which they can hash out an issue among themselves while gaining a measure of self-confidence in their opinions before sharing them with the larger group once the lecture resumes.

Some of the Signature Courses invite more lively participation than others. In her lecture "War: Critical Perspectives," which in part looked at the collateral damage of war on civilian populations and was at times critical of military tactics, Brooks quickly discovered that more than a quarter of her students were veterans, who could be at odds with her and other students. "We didn't do easy stuff in the lectures," says Brooks. "A lot of the things I brought up got a lot of people mad, and I was taken aback initially. At first, I thought the veterans would shut down and not participate. But they did participate, and we worked through a lot of things. It was an amazing experience." Many of her students were also children of immigrants from war-torn nations. Similarly, Rodriguez's class about New Jersey immigration had a built-in catalyst for many of her students: their parents had lived through many of the experiences and issues that the course addressed.

In facilitating class participation, lecturers say they have to be mindful of their role in it. "Summarizing a student's observation or answer to a question is helpful, but there is a danger of stepping on their point and making another one of your own," says Andy Egan, the philosophy professor who teaches the course on food. "It's bad when there is an atmosphere in which the professor is the only one who is authorized to say things that are credible. Or that the credibility that anyone else gets is what is conferred by the professor."

Although mindful of respecting student opinion, Kelemen isn't bashful about sharing his point of view, but he still pushes students to make their own arguments, to think for themselves. "That's academia," says Kelemen. "You want to encourage those arguments, based on theory and data."

And when there is a full-throated discussion under way, the lecturers know they have entered nirvana. Deborah Gray White, for one, knows that a lecture has been successful when, at its conclusion, students haven't even begun to gather their books, and many are lingering to ask more questions or make observations. Ethel Brooks, for her course on war, was stunned to see that one student for her final project had prepared an entire meal for the class based on ingredients that had been introduced into her native country's culture as a result of war. Daniel Ogilvie was fascinated by the observations of students—Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, a Buddhist—whom he invited onstage to share their beliefs, remarkable in their similarity despite a world rife with religious friction.

This is the primary goal of the Signature Courses and the promise of the new curriculum at the School of Arts and Sciences: to bring a wide-angled perspective as an invitation to inquiry and participation, to encourage students to think outside the boundaries of traditional disciplines and beyond the parochialism of their own upbringing. They must do so in order to understand that the challenges facing the 21st-century world have an interconnected complexity that will require nuanced solutions and an

appreciation of others. "I hope they come away from the class knowing that there are a bunch of questions out there worth thinking about," says Egan, sharing the sentiment of other lecturers teaching Signature Courses. "I hope they have some tools for doing the thinking and arriving at some answers instead of throwing their hands up in the air, feeling that the situation is hopeless." •

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